



Above, 1st. Lt. Shea Kennebrae, 99th Contracting Squadron, stops to refill some of his teammates water guns. Left, Airman 1st Class Tetoya Brooks, 57th Aircraft Generation Squadron, looks beaten but not defeated during the boys-against-the-girls water fight at the MDA summer camp.



Left, a counselor tries to refill his water gun during the annual water fight as camper Chris Stoddard looks on. Above, Team Nellis members pose and give a big wave. Twenty active duty and one retired Nellis community member volunteered to assist for the week. Right, MDA camper Erick Guerra looks perplexed as Senior Airman Jason Codol, 99th Security Forces Squadron, explains why Hangman is a better game than Tic-Tac-Toe.



Photos by Staff Sgt. Jim Bianchi

Nellis members make MDA summer camp a great success

**By Staff Sgt. Jim Bianchi
AWFC Public Affairs**

Recently, 21 volunteers from Team Nellis took part in the Nevada Muscular Dystrophy's Summer Camp 2000 at South Lake Tahoe, Nev., giving 35 disabled children a chance to be just kids for a week. "We don't treat these kids like their made of glass," said Ms. Amy Hernandez, director of the Las Vegas Chapter of the MDA. "This is the one week a year when the parents get a break and the kids get to be with children just like themselves. All of them are equal out here."

Each year, Nevada MDA sponsors a week-long adventure nestled along the shores of scenic Lake Tahoe. The children, called campers come from all over the state and are matched with volunteer counselors. This year, the lion's-share of volunteers were from Nellis.

Getting the word out and organizing the volunteers were 1st. Lt. Shea Kennebrae, 99th Contracting Squadron and Master Sgt. Velma Stradford, 57th Equipment Maintenance Squadron.

"We put notices in the paper and sent out email requests for volunteers. The response was excellent," said Sgt. Stradford.

According to Sgt. Stradford, the MDA camp requires a lot from their volunteer counselors. Applicants must be able to lift a child if necessary and to assist with some of children's special needs, such as bathing and eating. Even after an explanation of what was expected and the MDA-required an initial screening process and a medical records review, there were still more qualified Nellis volunteers than needed.

"We wish we could have used everybody who volunteered," said Ms. Hernandez.

The camp is well hidden among the old-growth yellow pine trees with a dozen cabins which the campers and counselors called home for a week. The campground belongs to the 4-H Club of Lake Tahoe and is designed especially for handicapped access so every child can have free run of the grounds and enjoy the planned activities and beautiful surrounding.

Retired Tech. Sgt. Dave Leoni started volunteering at the camp in 1998, while he was still on active duty and is one of

many repeat volunteers from past years. He continues to come back again and again each year.

"We're here to help the kids have fun, and they do," he said. "You can't believe how great that feeling is."

One of the biggest and most anticipated events of the week is the boys-against-the-girls water fight. The majority of campers are veterans from past years and knew what to expect during the melee. Most of the campers brought giant, multi-colored water guns capable of holding a quart or more of water. As soon as all the wheelchairs are carefully waterproofed and everyone has filled their oversized-water guns, a safety briefing is given and then "it's time to have some fun!" said Sgt. Leoni.

"The campers really come out of their shells here," said Sgt. Stradford. "Children who are normally reserved and quiet, race around and get wild here."

During the week, with so much going on, from speedboat rides to visiting baby goats and a pie eating contest to a talent show, the counselors have a hard time keeping up with the energetic campers.

Airman 1st Class Jason Lease, 57th EMS, can hardly keep track of his camper Charles McEvoy. "He likes to disappear," said Airman Lease. "I have to watch him," he said laughing.

Campers in electric wheelchairs speed across the open area between buildings with a counselor in tow. Occasionally, a chair will go by at high speed, jostling and bouncing it's occupant about. One look at their faces and there is no fear, just anticipation of getting to where they are going, just like children everywhere.

"They spend there life in these chairs, the chairs are there legs," said Ms. Hernandez.

First time volunteer counselor Lt. Kennebrae, was really sold from the first minute meeting the children. His impressions of both campers and counselors are very different from what he thought it would be.

"I came out here with an idea what to expect but the variety among MDA kids is unbelievable," said Lt. Kennebrae. "Even though their bodies have betrayed them, their minds remain sharp. You wouldn't believe what they can do. It's great."



Senior Airman Steve Radnor 57th Logistics Support Squadron, swings MDA camper Harrison Brzoza over the water, much to Harrison's delight. The week long camp gives kids in all stages of the disease a chance to be just normal kids for a week. The camp is set along the beautiful shores of scenic South Lake Tahoe, Nev. and ran from June 19 through June 25.